

Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers

JENNY CHAN, MARK SELDEN and PUN NGAI

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In 2010 alone, 18 rural migrant workers employed at the production facilities of the Taiwanese-owned electronics supplier Foxconn in mainland China attempted suicide. Fourteen of these young workers, aged 17–24, were confirmed dead, four were severely injured. Sparked by this series of suicides and based on ten years of research, *Dying for an iPhone* is the most extensive analysis available in English of the working conditions and collective struggles of Chinese migrant workers at Foxconn, the world's largest electronics manufacturer and major supplier to Apple and other global tech corporations.

Writing in highly accessible prose, the authors – renowned sociologists Jenny Chan, Mark Selden and Pun Ngai – aim to portray Foxconn workers' "hopes, dreams, and struggles to survive" (xv) for a broad readership that extends well beyond academia. Throughout the book, they contrast the slick, shiny and socially responsible (self-)image of Apple with their findings on persistent labour rights violations and the gruelling normality of wage labour at Foxconn. They convincingly develop the key overall argument: that management regimes at world market factory floors are crucially shaped by the power and purchasing practices of global brands in buyer-dominated supply chains.

The book is the outcome of a collective research effort that started in 2010 when scholars and students from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong began to conduct ethnographic and interview-based research at Foxconn's major manufacturing sites across China. The results were originally published in Chinese under the title *Wo zai Fushikang* (Me at Foxconn) in 2012, and soon translated into German, Italian and Polish. *Dying for an iPhone* is partly based on these earlier findings, but also builds on much more recent fieldwork which the authors and their collaborators continued until the end of 2019. The extensive interview data and field observations, as well as the use of other sources such as worker poems, allowed the authors to

collect numerous workers' personal stories that are skillfully interwoven with the analysis throughout the book.

This is exemplified in the first of the book's twelve chapters, which provides an excellent introduction to its core themes by focusing on the experiences of Tian Yu, a female Foxconn worker who jumped off the factory dormitory building in Shenzhen and was left paralyzed from her waist down at the age of 17. This is followed by a concise historical account of the remarkable growth of Foxconn and its relationship to Apple in the context of global industrial transformation and the rise of transnational contract manufacturing since the 1980s. The authors illustrate Foxconn's rapid expansion to over 40 manufacturing complexes across China and additional factories concentrated in lower-wage regions around the world, with a peak labour force strength of 1.3 million in 2012. While outlining Foxconn's more recent efforts to climb up the value chain, they remind us that in the case of consumer electronics such as iPhones, the by-far largest share of profits still falls to Apple and other major brands.

Against this background, the authors provide a detailed description of Foxconn's management system, which is characterized by abusive disciplinary methods, long hours of monotonous work at the assembly lines, inadequate health and safety provisions, as well as wage levels that hardly suffice to cover workers' basic needs. One of the most insightful chapters focuses on the strategic replacement of regular employees by a cheaper and more expendable labour force comprised of student interns from local vocational schools. As the authors outline, "internships" at Foxconn factories last from three months to a full year, during which students – in disregard of their actual training needs and in violation of legal regulations – have been subjected to the same working conditions as regular workers. The authors moreover document that the recruitment of student interns, who made up 15 per cent of Foxconn's workforce in China in 2010, has been actively promoted by local governments eager to attract and retain investments.

Further chapters look at the sphere of social reproduction, discussing the livelihood challenges and dislocations that confront rural migrant workers and their families. Defying managerial control and the lack of privacy at factory dormitories, an increasing number of Foxconn employees have rented apartments. Choices are limited, however, due to sharply rising rental fees in China's urban housing market. Attempts at establishing roots and a stable family life in the cities are further impeded by migrant workers' persistent exclusion from many urban welfare provisions. While some workers try to escape from factory work, for instance by starting small businesses, these efforts are often short-lived, the authors argue. Expectations of upward social mobility are thus severely thwarted, or as the authors succinctly put it: "Far from becoming middle-income earners in the city, most migrants continue to move in and out with a succession of industrial jobs" (p. 112).

The perhaps biggest strength of *Dying for an iPhone* – on top of these highly insightful accounts and a short additional chapter discussing Foxconn and Apple in relation to the global environmental crisis – is that it also foregrounds the fact of widespread worker resistance. Over the past decade, many media and NGO reports as well as some academic articles on Foxconn had a tendency of sidelining workers' self-activity and their collective organizing efforts, (un)intentionally reducing them to passive victims of exploitation. By highlighting and carefully analysing the numerous incidents of labour unrest at Foxconn factories, ranging from everyday forms of resistance, work slowdowns and collective suicide threats to riots and strike action, Chan, Selden and Pun convincingly refute the misleading image of worker passivity and powerlessness. They do so without forgetting to discuss the enormous difficulties for successful collective action in the face of state repression and management-controlled enterprise unions.

Dying for an iPhone thus is an outstanding work of critical public sociology that attempts, in the authors' own words, "to inform and heighten social consciousness concerning labour issues to inspire transnational activism in opposition to the oppression of labour wherever it is found" (p. 201). It is not only a must-read for scholars and students in the fields of contemporary China and labour studies, but also strongly recommended to anyone interested in the transformation of global production networks and the future of transnational working-class politics.

DANIEL FUCHS
dan.fuchs@hu-berlin.de